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Library assessment and user surveys in academic librarianship in the United States

by Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe

Academic libraries in the United States, like their parent institutions, are facing increasing demands for accountability and quality assurance in light of limited financial resources, increasing priorities, and questions related to return on investment. In addition to external pressures, academic librarians also seek to «provide the highest level of service to all library users»¹ as stated in the *Code of ethics* of the American Library Association. Library assessment enables and empowers libraries and librarians to respond to external accountability pressures while also monitoring and improving service quality. This essay provides a general overview of current library assessment initiatives in academic and research librarianship in the United States with a particular focus on user surveys as a mechanism for gathering useful data for decision-making and service development.

The value of academic libraries: an ACRL initiative²

Though many academic libraries have long-stranding initiatives to gather assessment data, the Value of academic libraries initiative³ of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) brought national attention and momentum to efforts to gather data about library impact and to demonstrate and communicate library value. In its signature 2010 report, *The value of academic libraries: a comprehensive research review and report*, ACRL took a leadership role in responding to demands for library accountability while also articulating the importance of library quality and impact. The report reviews the existing literature base on the impact of academic

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1 American Library Association, *Code of ethics of the American Library Association*. 2008, <<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics>>.

2 In interests of disclosure, I was serving as President of ACRL when the association established the Value of Academic Libraries Initiative and I have continued in various leadership roles since that time including co-lead facilitator for the Assessment in Action program.

3 Association of College and Research Libraries, *Value of academic libraries*. <<http://www.acrl.ala.org/value/>>.



libraries, as well as school, public, and special libraries, and then lays out next steps for academic libraries as well as the foundation of a research agenda on academic library impact and value.

The *Value* report identifies a number of specific actions that an academic library should take in order to be able to demonstrate its value in its institutional context including:

- define intended outcomes;
- create or implement systems for assessment management;
- determine what libraries enable students, faculty, student affairs professionals, administrators, and staff to do;
- develop systems to collect data on individual library user behavior, while maintaining privacy;
- engage in higher education accreditation processes
- appoint liaison librarians to support senior institutional leadership and/or offices of assessment or institutional research; and,
- create library assessment plans⁴.

Not too long after the release of the *Value* report, ACRL also approved and promulgated the *Standards for libraries in higher education*, which

are designed to guide academic libraries in advancing and sustaining their role as partners in educating students, achieving their institutions' missions, and positioning libraries as leaders in assessment and continuous improvement on their campuses⁵.

Together, the *Value* report and the *Standards for libraries in higher education* provide the intellectual foundation for the ACRL Value of Academic Libraries Initiative, embodied in ACRL's strategic plan, the *ACRL plan for excellence*⁶:

Value of academic libraries

Goal: Academic libraries demonstrate alignment with and impact on institutional outcomes.

Objectives:

1. Leverage existing research that will articulate and promote the value of academic and research libraries.
2. Increase research that demonstrates the value of academic and research libraries.
3. Increase the visibility of libraries in national conversations and activities focused on the value of higher education.
4. Develop and deliver responsive professional development programs that build the skills and capacity for leadership and local data-informed and evidence-based advocacy.

Recognizing that academic librarians would need support and training in order to meet the challenges of demonstrating library value and undertaking the work of library assessment, ACRL offers a multitude of professional development opportunities both in-person and online; however, *Assessment in action: academic libraries*

⁴ Association of College and Research Libraries, *Value of academic libraries: a comprehensive research review and report*, researched by Megan Oakleaf. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2010, p. 12-17. <http://www.acrl.org/value/?page_id=21>.

⁵ Association of College and Research Libraries, *Standards for libraries in higher education*. 2011, <<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/standardslibraries>>.

⁶ Association of College and Research Libraries, *ACRL plan for excellence*. Originally approved in 2011 and updated in 2013, <<http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/strategicplan/stratplan>>.

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*and student success*⁷deserves particular note as it is not only providing training but also analysis of campus impact.

The *Assessment in Action* (AiA) program is supported by a grant from the United States' Institute for Museum and Library Services. The grant supports the development of a professional development program intended to strengthen librarians' competencies in campus leadership and data-informed advocacy. The AiA program has three specific goals:

1. Develop the professional competencies of librarians to document and communicate the value of their academic libraries primarily in relation to their institution's goals for student learning and success.
2. Build and strengthen collaborative relationships with higher education stakeholders around the issue of library value.
3. Contribute to higher education assessment work by creating approaches, strategies, and practices that document the contribution of academic libraries to the overall goals and missions of their institutions.

Results from the first year of the program have been documented in *Academic library contributions to student success: documented practices from the field*. AiA teams have developed useful methods and assessment tools as well as protocols that can be replicated at other institutions. Assessment findings include:

- Library instruction builds students' confidence with the research process.
- Library instruction contributes to retention and persistence, particularly for students in first-year experience courses and programs.
- Multiple library instruction sessions or activities in connection with a course are more effective than one-shot instruction sessions.
- Collaborative instructional activities and services between the library and other campus units (e.g., writing center, study skills and tutoring services) promote student learning and success⁸.

In addition, six recommendations for evidence-based demonstration of library value emerged from the analysis of the first year of AiA:

1. Library assessment is most effective when it aligns with institutional priorities and mission.
2. Library assessment that includes the participation of representatives from other campus departments and units (e.g., faculty, institutional research, academic administration, student services) increases the quality of the assessment design and results.
3. Libraries can contribute important data about student learning and success to an institution's accreditation self-study and review.
4. A mixed-methods approach to library assessment strengthens and enriches findings about library impact.
5. Academic librarians recognize how assessment activities advance an institution's academic mission and are poised to lead library assessment initiatives.
6. Assessment achieves sustainability and meaningful integration with the library's services and programs when it is a designated responsibility of one or more librarians⁹.

⁷ Association of College and Research Libraries, *Assessment in action: academic libraries and student success*. <<http://www.ala.org/acrl/AiA>>.

⁸ Association of College and Research Libraries, *Academic library contributions to student success: documented practices from the field*, prepared by Karen Brown; contributions by Kara J. Malenfant. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p. 1-2. Available online at <<http://www.ala.org/acrl/AiA>>.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

Results and recommendations from years two and three of AiA will be disseminated by ACRL as they become available.

Statistics and assessment: an ARL focus area

ACRL is not the only professional association in the United States that is supporting librarians and libraries in the work of library assessment. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) also has a focus area on statistics & assessment¹⁰.

Particularly noteworthy among the ARL initiatives was an early consultation service that was first called *Making library assessment work* and that later evolved to *Effective, sustainable, and practical assessment* with Steve Hiller and Jim Self serving as visiting program officers¹¹. The program featured onsite visits to individual libraries comprised of discussions of local issues, reviewing ARL programs and resources, and a presentation on assessment methods, analysis of data, reporting, and library improvement. As a follow-on to the visit, Hiller and Self provided a report of issues and recommendations related to assessment for the local institution's consideration¹².

ARL has also created the only national conference in the United States focused on library assessment, the Library assessment Conference, in recognition that «the growing library assessment community needed a venue for exchanging information and ideas, both formally and informally»¹³. Held in even-numbered years since 2006, the Library assessment Conference provides an opportunity for exchange of expertise and experience as well as sharing of results from assessment and research projects. Demand to be a presenter at the conference as well as to be an attendee has grown steadily over time and the conference is also attracting international participants. Proceedings from each of the conferences are freely available online as well, representing a wealth of resources for the assessment community to draw upon¹⁴. The ARL Library Assessment blog serves as an online complement to the conference as well as other ARL assessment initiatives¹⁵.

ARL is also a partner in the LibValue project,

a three-year study funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services to define and measure ways in which academic libraries create value through research, teaching and learning, and social, professional, and public engagement¹⁶.

10 Association of Research Libraries, *Statistics & assessment*. <<http://www.arl.org/focus-areas/statistics-assessment>>.

11 Association of Research Libraries, *Making library assessment work: practical approaches for developing and sustaining effective assessment*. <<https://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/VPOHillerSelf.pdf>>.

12 The University of Illinois Library participated in the ARL program and has posted the report received from Hiller and Self online at <<http://www.library.illinois.edu/assessment/testing/survey/AssessmentReview.pdf>>.

13 Martha Kyrillidou; Damon Jaggars, *Current themes in academic library assessment: select papers from the 2010 library assessment conference*, «Evidence Based Library and Information Practice», 8 (2013), n. 2, p.4-8, <<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/article/view/19553>>.

14 Association of Research Libraries, *Library assessment conference: building effective, sustainable, practical assessment*. <<http://libraryassessment.org/archive/index.shtml>>.

15 Association of Research Libraries, *Library assessment*. <<http://libraryassessment.info/>>.

16 Association of Research Libraries, *LibValue: values, outcomes, and return on investment*. <<http://www.libvalue.org/home>>.

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The LibValue project placed particular emphasis on understanding approaches to researching return-on-investment and how such approaches could demonstrate library value.

Evidence-based decision-making and a culture of assessment

Academic librarians in the United States are fortunate to have ACRL and ARL as professional associations attending to the issues of demonstrating library value and offering professional development related to library assessment. Ultimately, however, library assessment is a local activity aimed not only at demonstrating value to stakeholders but also at increasing value through the use of assessment data in planning and strategy development. As Deanna Marcum and Roger Schonfeld state in their issue brief *Driving with data*,

evidence-based decision-making allows libraries to take new strategic directions more decisively and develop innovative service offerings more effectively than would otherwise be possible¹⁷.

Evidence-based decision-making in librarianship is also sometimes known as evidence-based librarianship or evidence-based library and information practice. Regardless of the naming convention, the idea is the same – that decisions about library services, collections, facilities, etc. should be informed by data and not just anecdotal observation or personal preference.

Marcum and Schonfeld point out the importance of clearly understanding the nature of the problem under consideration and how evidence relates to that problem; however, they also observe that organizational structure and culture impact evidence-based decision-making.

The touchstone article on assessment and organizational culture in the United States is *Creating a culture of assessment: a catalyst for organizational change* by Amos Lakos and Shelley Phipps¹⁸. They identify the following characteristics as evidence of a culture of assessment in a library:

- The organization's mission, planning, and policies are focused externally—on supporting the customer's need for access to information.
- How performance measures will be assessed is included in organizational planning documents, such as strategic plans and unit goals.
- Leadership commits to, and financially supports, assessment activities.
- Staff recognize the value of assessment and engage in it as part of their regular assignments. Individual and organizational responsibility for assessment is addressed explicitly – in job descriptions or is otherwise communicated formally.
- Relevant data and user feedback are routinely collected, analyzed, and used to set priorities, allocate resources, and make decisions.
- Assessment activities are supported by a Management Information System (MIS) or Decision Support System (DSS).
- Services, programs, and products are evaluated for quality, impact, and efficiency.
- Staff are supported to continuously improve their capability to serve customers and are rewarded for this.

17 Deanna Marcum; Roger C. Schonfeld, *Driving with data: a roadmap for evidence-based decision making in academic libraries*, New York: Ithaka S+R, 2014, p. 2. Available online at <<http://sr.ithaka.org/blog-individual/driving-data-roadmap-evidence-based-decision-making-academic-libraries>>.

18 Amos Lakos; Shelley Phipps, *Creating a culture of assessment: a catalyst for organizational change*, «Portal: Libraries and the Academy», 4 (2004), n.3, p. 345-361.

- Staff are rewarded for work and the application of new learning that demonstrates improved service quality or better outcomes for customers.
- On-going staff development in measurement, evaluation, and assessment is provided and supported.
- Units within the library have defined critical processes and established measures of success.
- Individual staff develop customer-focused S*M*A*R*T goals in an annual planning process and monitor progress regularly. (SMART = Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Oriented, and Timely).

While many of these characteristics could serve as a fruitful focus for further discussion, «relevant data and user feedback are routinely collected, analyzed, and used to set priorities, allocate resources, and make decisions» brings this essay to its focus on user surveys.

User surveys for academic libraries

A survey of four-year academic libraries in the United States in 2013 found that 71% of libraries report that their librarians use assessment data to improve practice¹⁹. Though assessment data can take many forms, one common data type is that gathered through user surveys. Academic libraries implement user surveys in order to better understand user needs, preferences, characteristics, work practices, feelings, perceptions, behaviors, attitudes, and satisfaction with library services and resources²⁰. Different user surveys focus on different areas – e.g., satisfaction, work practices, etc. – and so selecting a survey instrument requires clarity about the kind of data that will be most useful to the decisions currently facing an academic library.

Some libraries develop their own local surveys, perhaps by adapting another library's local survey. Such an approach has the advantage of offering complete control over the questions that are posed and response options; however, disadvantages include the challenges of developing valid and reliable questions and the lack of national benchmarking data for comparative analysis (though it may be possible to benchmark against the original library if adapting another library's local survey).

Another option that many academic libraries use is to contract for a standardized survey. The most prominent options for contracted surveys are LibQUAL+® from ARL, faculty, graduate student, and undergraduate student surveys from Ithaka S+R, the Measuring Information Service Outcomes (MISO) survey, and the Research practices survey from the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) Consortium. Each of these surveys offers a particular focus, benefits, and limitations. What follows is a summary of the four surveys aimed at providing a general overview of the options available.

LibQUAL+® is a suite of services that libraries use to «solicit, track, understand, and act upon users' opinions of service quality»²¹, though the name is typically used by librarians to refer specifically to the web-based survey that is at the core of the services suite.

19 Meredith Gorran Farkas; Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe; Amy Harris Houk, *Bridges and Barriers: factors influencing a culture of assessment in academic libraries*, «College & Research Libraries», in press, available online at <<http://crl.acrl.org/content/early/2014/03/03/crl14-601.full.pdf+html>>.

20 Note: 'user' should be understood to include all of those who a library intends to serve and not just those who indeed make use of one or more services. It would be perhaps more accurate to say a 'user and non-user survey' but that seems very awkward.

21 Association of Research Libraries, *LibQUAL general information*. <https://www.libqual.org/about/about_lq/general_info>.

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The purpose of LibQUAL+® is to help libraries «assess and improve library services, change organizational culture, and market the library»²² with the specific goals being to:

- Foster a culture of excellence in providing library service
- Help libraries better understand user perceptions of library service quality
- Collect and interpret library user feedback systematically over time
- Provide libraries with comparable assessment information from peer institutions
- Identify best practices in library service
- Enhance library staff members' analytical skills for interpreting and acting on data

The LibQUAL+® website is extensive and includes background information, procedures and implementation steps, training and tutorials, scholarly literature on the development of the instruments, answers to frequent asked questions, and a *Virtual share fair* with links to examples of how individual libraries and library consortia have used their results. LibQUAL+® has roots back to 1999 and is available in 21 language translations.

Libraries that implement LibQUAL+® receive a notebook of analyzed results and also have access to LibQUAL+® Analytics, a tool that enables creation of institution-specific tables and charts. Through the analytics web-based tool, a library can analyze its own data, including longitudinal comparisons across years if the survey has been conducted more than once, as well as benchmark against other institutions that have conducted the survey.

Faculty, graduate student, and undergraduate student surveys are offered by Ithaka S+R and are distinct but complementary surveys. A library can choose to contract for one, two, or all of the surveys as well as supplemental analysis and consulting services.

The faculty survey covers these topics:

- Essential elements of the research lifecycle, including how research practices and methods may be changing, research dissemination practices and needs, and preservation and management of research data and primary sources;
- Instructional practices and needs, covering undergraduates as well as graduate students, student research skills, and online learning and MOOCs.
- How scholars discover and access needed information resources for their teaching and research, including the changes to formats and collections; and
- The evolving role of the academic library²³.

The student surveys explore:

- What students expect to achieve from their higher education and its value for their future goals;
- How they perceive their coursework and new forms of pedagogy, such as online learning;
- The types of assignments students receive and the resources they use to complete them; and
- The role of extra- and co-curricular activities²⁴.

All of the surveys offer optional additional modules. For the faculty survey, a library can also select the National survey option, which is the version of the survey that Ithaka S+R conducts using a national sample every three years. Faculty survey results can be benchmarked against national results; however, there is no national student survey equivalent for benchmarking student results.

²² Ivi, *passim*.

²³ Ithaka S+R, *Ithaka S+R local surveys*. <<http://sr.ithaka.org/content/surveys>>.

²⁴ Ivi, *passim*.

Libraries that implement any of the Ithaka S+R surveys receive implementation guidance and advice as well as a graphical report of the findings²⁵ and the raw survey data results. The website for the Ithaka S+R surveys is somewhat minimal, though it does provide institutional profiles of how example institutions have implemented the surveys and used the results. Greater detail is provided in the *Gaining perspective: understanding your students and faculty* prospectus, which is available upon request via email.

Measuring Information Service Outcomes (MISO) is a web-based survey «designed to measure how faculty, students, and staff view library and computing services in higher education»²⁶. The survey is designed around these research questions:

- What services and resources are important to our constituents, and how successfully do our organizations deliver them?
- How effectively do we communicate with our campus communities about our services and resources?
- How skilled are our constituents in the use of software and library databases? What additional skills do they wish to learn, and how do they wish to learn?
- Which software and hardware tools do our constituents use, and which of these tools do they own?
- What roles do our constituents play on campus? What demographic factors identify them?
- What benchmarks can be established for excellent delivery of library and computing services?

The MISO survey is unique in addressing information services from the perspective of both information technology and library services in a single survey instrument. The survey team is comprised of members from Bryn Mawr College, Davidson College, Brandeis University, Spring Hill College, Susquehanna University, and Wofford College and is not affiliated with any professional services organization or association²⁷.

The MISO survey website includes guidance for the process of conducting the survey as well as a timeline and checklist of activities involved and also a listing of presentations and publications based on the survey.

The Research Practices Survey is offered by the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) Consortium and “collects information on students’ research experiences and assesses information literacy skills”²⁸ based on the ACRL *Information literacy competency standards for higher education*²⁹.

The purpose of the Research practices survey is to:

- (1) study students’ research experiences, (2) use these findings to improve the ways we help students develop their research skills, and (3) determine what changes occur in research abilities as students progress through their academic careers³⁰.

25 A copy of the University of Illinois Library faculty survey results is available online at <<http://www.library.illinois.edu/assessment/ithakasurvey/UIUC.pdf>>.

26 MISO, *Measuring information service outcomes: about the MISO survey*. <<http://www.misosurvey.org/>>.

27 MISO, *History*. <<http://www.misosurvey.org/about/history/>>.

28 HEDS Consortium, *2014-2015 HEDS research practices survey*. <<http://www.hedsconsortium.org/research-practices-survey/>>.

29 Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information literacy competency standards for higher education*. 2000, <<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency>>.

30 HEDS Consortium, *2014-2015 HEDS research practices survey* cit.

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Questions on the survey explore student experiences with research, course assignments, perceptions of research, and familiarity with research terms and strategies. As such, this survey is unique in its focus on student learning outcomes and contributory experiences. The Research practices survey is also unique in offering an option for longitudinal analysis that tracks how individual students change over time by resurveying them and then associating their responses from each survey.

The website for the Research practices survey is straight-forward and includes access to the survey instrument itself. Institutions that are part of HEDS and administer the Research practices survey receive raw data files, institutional frequency reports, comparative data from other HEDS institutions, and tools for creating comparison groupings. Institutions that are not part of HEDS only receive the raw data files and institutional frequency reports.

Using data from user surveys

Conducting a user survey requires a large amount of library staff time and effort in addition to expenditures for participation incentives and fees if a survey is contracted for externally. Given the expense, careful attention to planning for how the data from the survey will be communicated and used in decision-making is warranted in order to gain the maximum benefit from the investment.

Identifying a survey coordinator will help to make certain that it is clear who in the library organization is responsible for overseeing the survey and the dissemination of the results. This person needs to be conversant with the basics of survey research as well as project management and coordination. One individual is unlikely, however, to have all of the analysis skills as well as placement in the organizational hierarchy to command attention to the results. As such, while the coordinator will likely oversee the process, library leaders will need to communicate the importance of and priority on use of the survey results in decision-making and be models of doing so.

The most common use of survey results is immediately after the data are gathered and analyzed. This is logical and allows for immediacy of response and communication to users about how their input made a difference in the operations and/or strategic directions of the library. It can be particularly effective to frame the communication to users about the impact of their feedback using the format «You said ____ and so the Library did ____» though more complex changes may not lend themselves to this straightforward message approach.

Also useful, however, are retrospective or summative reviews of user survey results to investigate trends over time in user survey responses. Even if the same survey instrument is not used repeatedly, it is likely possible to map questions on one survey to questions on another survey that probe similar topics. For example, has satisfaction with particular library services varied over time and how do those variations relate to changes in the service profile? Or, as another example, do particular user populations report greater/lesser desire for certain types of formats than others and has the relative desire levels changed over time? A version of this kind of trend review could also focus on the earliest and latest survey results available on a specific topic. Though this analysis would lack the nuance of tracking a topic through multiple surveys, comparing two points in time would make the analysis less time-consuming.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that user survey data will be best considered in context of other data that the library has available. Typical library statistics such as circulation data, download numbers, liaison consultations, etc. can be illuminated by and/or bring illumination to user responses to surveys.

Conclusion

Library assessment is a growing area of activity in the United States, responding to demands for accountability as well as professional commitment to service quality assurance and improvement. User surveys offer the opportunity from librarians to bring the perspectives of users and their reflections on their experiences, desires, preferences, etc. into library decision-making processes. As the information economy continues to develop and big data becomes more prominent, library assessment will become all the more important as librarians steward limited resources for the maximum benefit for their communities.

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